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DORGAN SAYS NEW STUDY BOLSTERS HIS BILL TO BRING HIGH-SPEED INTERNET TO RURAL AREAS

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) — U.S. Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND) said he's not surprised by the results of a new study, released Wednesday by President Clinton in North Carolina, that finds rural America is falling behind urban America in terms of access to high speed Internet access.

Dorgan is the author of legislation that aims to close that gap, the Rural Broadband Enhancement Act (S. 2307). He said he welcomes the report.

"Closing the digital divide between rural and urban America is absolutely essential to rural economies," Dorgan said. "The President's report is very significant, not only because it documents the need for greater effort, but because it makes clear that for the first time ever, this issue is commanding the attention and resources at the very highest levels of the federal government."

The study was conducted by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) at the direction of the President of the United States. It found that while 65% of cities with more than 250,000 residents have access to broadband telecommunication services through cable modem services, less than 5% of towns with 10,000 or fewer residents do. The disparity with Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) service is about the same. The study found that 56% of cities with populations of 100,000 or more have access to DSL broadband service, while less than 5% of towns with 10,000 or fewer residents do.

"The bad news is that rural America is being left behind," Dorgan said. "The good news is that we're facing up to that fact. We're beginning to marshal the resources to correct it, and we're doing so with the leadership of the President of the United States. That's a powerful boost."

The study makes a number of recommendations, including increased federal funding to accelerate rural broadband build out. It also recommends that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) make broadband services eligible for support from the FCC's "universal service" fund. The report also recommends reform of Rural Utilities Services lending policies to encourage broadband build out activities.

Many of those recommendations are also included in Dorgan's legislation.

Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information Greg Rohde, who administers the NTIA and the study it conducted, said the report confirms the need for much of what Dorgan and other rural members of the Senate have been working to secure. "Senator Dorgan has lead the charge to see that North Dakota and other rural states aren't left behind," Rohde said Wednesday. "His leadership helped prompt this study and pushed the need to close the Digital Divide to the front of the agenda President Clinton and Vice President Gore are pursuing."

Rohde, who is the President's top telecommunications policy advisor, is a North Dakota native and served as Dorgan's chief aide for telecommunications policy before assuming the post of Assistant Secretary of Commerce.

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